

# Abuse in Athenian democracy

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We are used to the idea that political debate and electioneering in modern western democracies can descend into an exchange of personal attacks and ‘negative campaigning’. A politician’s private history (for example, a period of alcoholism) can be used against them very effectively. Sexual misconduct (and/or lying about such conduct to the voters) is also a ‘gift’ for one’s political opponents. But rarely – outside at least the worlds of satire and ridicule in the tabloids – does insinuation and innuendo descend into outright abuse.

Indeed, politicians seem to have to be careful to avoid abusive language about their opponents and colleagues. When the last Conservative Prime Minister suggested to a television journalist that some of his cabinet colleagues were ‘bastards’ for plotting against him, he didn’t realize that sound equipment was still recording him. Although this recording enhanced his reputation among many voters, he could never have used this language in Parliament or in an on-the-record speech without criticism.

How far could Athenian politicians go with personal attacks and abuse? This is a good question to ask about any democratic society because it translates into a bigger and even more important question about freedom of speech. We know that the Athenians prized ‘free speech’ (*isêgoria*, *parrhêsia*) in their democratic assembly and lawcourts as do modern western democracies. But there are certain kinds of speech (slander, ‘hate speech’, swearing, and obscenity) which are deemed inappropriate, dangerous, or illegal. Modern democracies worry a great deal about restricting freedom of expression, and yet we all know that certain speech should be unacceptable and illegal because it is racist, sexist and/or constitutes an incitement to violence, and/or psychological bullying. Some commentators have argued that there is not really any such thing as genuine and complete ‘free speech’ in modern societies and that this is actually a good thing.

## Letting rip

At first glance, it seems that Athenian politicians could get away with much more personal abuse than their twenty-first century counterparts. Here is the Attic orator Demosthenes in the fourth century letting rip at his rival Aeschines in a speech called *On the Crown* (he is responding to Aeschines’ prosecution speech in a politically-motivated trial in 330 B.C.):

*If my accuser had been an Aeacus or a Rhadamanthus or a Minos, and not a crumb-gatherer, a market-place hack and a pestilential scribbler, I do not think he would have produced such pompous phrases, bawling out ‘O Earth and Sun and Virtue’ and such, as in a tragic play, and invoking ‘Intelligence and Education, by which the honourable is distinguished from the shameful’: you [i.e. the jury] no doubt heard him saying these things. What share have you [i.e. Aeschines] and yours in virtue, you piece of rubbish?*

Demosthenes’ point at the beginning of this section is that Aeschines’ pompous language shows him up. Unlike mythological figures who all had a reputation for being genuinely wise and fair judges or accusers in the underworld, Aeschines is not genuine or fair at all: he is an imposter. Indeed, the accusation that his rhetoric is more at home in a tragic drama is not made at random: Aeschines actually had a previous career as a tragic actor. Demosthenes constantly reminded juries of this fact in

order to cast him as a peddler of falsehoods and illusion. However, Demosthenes actually has it both ways with this insult: a little later on in this speech he will stress that Aeschines’ acting was so bad that he was frequently booed and hissed off stage. Indeed, he is a third-part actor (*tritagonistês*) who plays slaves and tyrants.

Demosthenes goes on to accuse Aeschines of lying about the good education he claims to have received: whereas Demosthenes attended proper schools, Aeschines did the servile job of cleaning the school which his father taught at. He also claims that Aeschines’ father was a slave who ‘wore thick fetters and a wooden collar’ and that his mother combined prostitution with being a priestess of a strange and disreputable religious cult. When Aeschines somehow got himself enrolled as a free citizen, he did petty and menial secretarial jobs for his parish. The upshot of all this personal abuse is to imply that Aeschines is not a legitimate citizen: he is slave-born and his rise to prominence as an elite politician masks a previous career of low-status jobs. It is quite clear from this and many other lawcourt speeches that Athenians did not like their politicians to come from humble backgrounds and, of course, they did not want to hear that their advisers’ citizen-status was questionable.

## Getting even

But even by Athenian standards, Demosthenes’ abuse is particularly vehement and vivid. It is revealing that he has to explain and justify its extent and nature:

*Let no one condemn me for bad taste, as I do not regard as reasonable anyone who insults poverty, or who boasts at having been brought up in affluence. But I am forced to enter such a debate by this man’s slurs and slander.*

The justification for status-related abuse, therefore, is that Aeschines broke the protocols of decency first. And it is indeed true that Aeschines’ prosecution speech (*Against Ctesiphon*) and two previous court-speeches aimed at wounding Demosthenes politically (*Against Timarchus* and *On the Embassy*) contain a lot of personal abuse, including the implication that Demosthenes’ father was a Scythian (and hence not even Greek, let alone Athenian). Unsurprisingly, Aeschines justifies this personal attack on the grounds that Demosthenes had already slandered his father’s status.

My favourite example of Aeschines’ abusive rhetoric is from *On the Embassy*. In this speech, Aeschines claims that Demosthenes threatened his own cousin with prosecution for cutting his head open. In fact, says Aeschines, Demosthenes had deliberately cut his own head and was trying to blackmail his cousin. A court fined him for not going through with the case. This sort of malicious legal blackmail was known as ‘sycophancy’, and calling a rival a ‘sycophant’ was an effective way of discrediting him. In the next sentence, Aeschines argues that it is no good Demosthenes ‘putting on airs’ before a jury when everyone knows that he is ‘the bastard son’ of a knife-maker. Again, illegitimacy and low-status origins form the basis of the insult. But here, there is an implicit connection between Demosthenes’ low social status and the fact that he is legally and politically corrupt – even to the detriment of his own relatives!

## Justifying one’s position

It is hard to know which items of abuse exchanged between Aeschines and Demosthenes were grounded in truth and which were false (we would call the latter ‘slander’). But it is clear that the name of the game here was to justify ‘going personal’ by claiming that it was the other guy who had started it. And, of course, the other guy’s abuse was always ‘slander’ while your own attacks were just a reluctant exposing of ‘the facts’. But one had to be careful with one’s own abusive rhetoric. By being too abusive a politician ran the risk of giving his opponent the moral and political high ground. In *On the Crown*, Demosthenes is able to gain this high ground by characterizing Aeschines’ abuse as insulting to proper legal process:

*And you [i.e. Aeschines] bawl out, using names both fair and foul, a sort of cart-language, fitting for you and your kind, but not for me. And there is this further point, Athenians: I think abuse differs from prosecution in this respect, that prosecution implies offences for which the laws provide penalties, whereas abuse is concerned with slanders which enemies utter about one another as their natural inclination prompts them. And I suppose our ancestors built these lawcourts not that we should assemble here to listen to us abusing one another with scandalous accounts of our private lives, but that we may convict someone if he has offended against the city. Though he knew this as well as I do, Aeschines none the less chose to rail against me rather than accuse me.*

When Demosthenes abuses Aeschines in return, he tries hard to sound reluctant. And it was not just opponents who could meet with this sort of anti-abuse rhetoric. Demosthenes and other politicians sometimes criticized juries and assemblies for enjoying personal abuse too much, as if they were being forced against their will to indulge the appetites of their mass audience.

Demosthenes’ superb (but not unique) rhetorical sleight of hand, where he is able to use abuse and condemn it in the same speech, shows that it would be over-simple to say that Athenian politics and law had a no-holds-barred approach to personal attacks. It was a fine line for the politician to walk: either he launched attacks which would be politically and rhetorically effective or attacks which would lay him open to the charge that he was not playing by the proper rules of argument, proof, and process. Despite the differences between the Athenian lawcourts and the Houses of Parliament, in classical Athens, as in the twenty-first century, a politician had to choose the right words at the right time.

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